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Connecticut Confronts the Guillotine: The French Revolution and the Land of Steady Habits

ROBERT J. IMHOLT

SOMETIMES in the spring of 1793, Thomas and Samuel Green, the most prominent printers in New Haven and publishers of the *Connecticut Journal*, produced a broadside originally printed by the Minerva Press of London with the headline, “Execution of the French King.” Even more prominent than the headline was the attention-getting subject matter that dominated the upper third of the broadside: a woodcut of the execution of Louis XVI bordered with decorative skulls and crossbones. Labelled, “A View of the Guillotine or, the Modern Beheading Machine, at Paris,” the woodcut gave visual prominence not to the monarch but to the instrument of his death. Attracted by the startling visual and the headlines, the reader next encountered a brief description of the functioning of the “beheading machine,” including the position of “the sufferer” and the provision for the severed body part. In smaller print, the lower two-thirds of the broadside provided the January decrees of the French National Convention, a report of the day of execution, and some “anecdotes” about the king’s premonition of his fate and his demeanor on the eve of his execution.¹

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¹*Execution of the French King* (Printed at the Minerva Office, London, repr T. and S. Green, New-Haven, [1793]).

While it is unclear how many copies of the broadside the Greens printed and sold, the Greens clearly saw the document as a marketable commodity. Connecticut newspapers had devoted a considerable amount of space to events in France since the meeting of the Estates-General in 1789. Publications concerning murders and executions had always been relatively high demand items, and the Greens may have felt that Dr. Guillotine's machine would spark a certain fascination among Yankee tinkerers. Whatever their reasons for printing it, the Greens' broadside raises questions about how the people of Connecticut responded to the French Revolution in general and the regicide in particular.²

News of the execution of the king met a Connecticut public in large measure favorably disposed to the French Revolution. They had cheered the calling of the Estates-General, the storming of the Bastille, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. The Greens' *Connecticut Journal*, for example, rejoiced that "the French Nation had changed from adore[rs] of Kings into stern vindicators of natural right" and had become "advocates . . . for publican modesty and virtue." Speaking to the Society of the Cincinnati, an association of Revolutionary War officers, on the anniversary of independence in 1792, Hartford attorney Theodore Dwight declared that "the fire of freedom caught from this continent, flames with god-like ardour in the other parts of the earth." In France, Dwight claimed, "more than twenty millions of people have been rescued from the sufferings, and ignominy of slavery, and elevated to the dignity and happiness of freedom." Yale President Ezra Stiles was ecstatic. He wrote English dissenter Richard Price to "congratulate the world on the glorious phenomenon of civil and religious LIBERTY in France." According to Connecticut's Noah Webster, many "felt nearly the same interest in its success" as they had "in the establishment of American

²Such broadsides could produce a variety of reactions. See, for example, "On Seeing the Print Exhibiting the Ruins of the Bastille," Anne Eliza Bleecker, *The Posthumous Works of Ann Eliza Bleecker, in Prose and Verse* (New York: T. and J. Swords, 1793), 329-32.

independence.”³ Having rejected the divine right of kings in their own revolution, Connecticut residents were elated that France was following a similar path.

For more religiously inclined Connecticut writers, the French Revolution was part of a divine plan to reform the world in anticipation of the Second Coming. For Reverend Jonathan Edwards Jr. of New Haven, the state’s leading anti-slavery advocate, the National Assembly held out the hope that the slave trade and slavery itself would soon be abolished.⁴ Samuel Fish went further and suggested that France, “where Satan’s principal seat has been for ages past,” was now playing an essential role in God’s plan. The Beast of the Book of Revelation had been driven from the land and was in full retreat. The millennium was at hand.⁵

However, the execution of the king in January 1793 changed opinions. To be sure, some in Connecticut who had supported the revolution since 1789 considered the beheading of Louis XVI to be simply another step in the progress of liberty. At its Independence Day celebration in New Haven in 1793, members of the Society of the Cincinnati raised their glasses in a toast, “May the Fate of Louis the Sixteenth make Tyrants tremble.”⁶ Ezra Stiles, then in the midst of composing his history of the English judges who had condemned King Charles the First, hoped that “after the present war of Kings . . . a few more royal Tyrants [will] meet their just deserts [sic].” “Royal treason or, sovereign parricide against the state, most justly merit *tyrranicidium*, or the death of deaths,” he continued,

³New Haven Connecticut Journal, March 30, 1791; Theodore Dwight, *An oration, spoken before the Society of the Cincinnati, of the state of Connecticut, met in Hartford, on the 4th of July, 1792* (Hartford, CT: Hudson & Godwin, 1792), 17, 11; Ezra Stiles to Richard Price, October 30, 1790, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven; Noah Webster, *The Revolution in France, Considered in Respect to Its Progress and Effects* (New York: George Bunge and Co., 1794), xx.

⁴Jonathan Edwards Jr., *The injustice and impolicy of the slave trade, and of the slavery of the Africans . . .* (New Haven: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1791), 29-30.

⁵Samuel Fish, *An humble address to every Christian of every nation and denomination of people under heaven* (Norwich, CT: Jonathan Trumbull, 1792), 14-15.

⁶New Haven Connecticut Journal, July 10, 1793.

concluding: "The Jacobin Societies have proved the salvation of France."⁷

The regicide also made sense to those who saw world events in apocalyptic terms. Ridgefield Baptist minister Elias Lee, for example, saw the regicide as wholly "justifiable." The "destruction of the royal family" was "providential retaliation of the persecutions, murders, and massacres, of thousands and thousands of poor protestants." While there might have been too much zeal and haste on the part of the National Convention in reaching its verdict, the act itself was the fulfillment of numerous prophesies. Similar sentiments were expressed by Benjamin Farnham of Granby. While the king and the royal family fell victim to the frenzy of the mob and suffered "the most horrid cruelties," it seemed a fitting recompense for the thousands of Protestants killed by the "royal monsters," and "comport[ed] with the prophecy extremely well." To Richard Brothers, the English prophet, whose works were published in Connecticut, "the revolution in France and its consequences proceeded entirely from the judgment of God." Louis XVI's death was "to fulfill the pre-determined judgment of God."⁸ Whether a necessary step in the onward march of republicanism or a portent of the end times, a few Connecticut observers looked upon the execution of the French king as an act of justice, human or divine.

These reactions supporting the beheading of Louis XVI, however, were the exception rather than the rule, and with the onset of the Reign of Terror, articles presenting a positive view of events in France virtually disappeared from Connecticut newspapers. A more typical opinion during the rest of the 1790s, was that of Charles Chauncey of Hartford who considered the regicide "a wanton act of barbarity, disgraceful even to the Parisian mob." But discerning the views of the majority of

⁷Ezra Stiles, *A History of the Three Judges of King Charles I . . .* (Hartford, CT: Elisha Babcock, 1794), 219, 272.

⁸Elias Lee, *The Dissolution of Earthly Monarchies . . .* (Danbury, CT: N. Douglas, 1794), 25; Benjamin Farnham, *Dissertation on the prophecies . . .* (East Windsor, CT: Luther Pratt, 1800), 90, 93, 97; Richard Brothers, *God's awful warnings to a giddy, careless, sinful world . . .* (New London: S. Green, 1795), 95, 107.

the citizens of Connecticut in this era presents a challenge to the historian since few left any record. The ongoing accounts of events in France set forth in newspapers, pamphlets, and broadsides such as the Greens' undoubtedly both reflected and shaped the public Connecticut mindset. Importantly, the ways in which the events were depicted in text and images drew upon various strands of an already existing popular culture. A study of these sources suggests three fundamentally different, yet interconnected ways of interpreting the events in France. First, a culture of sensibility meshed with a popular sense of sympathy for the victims of the guillotine. At the same time, it induced a sense of horror that paralleled enthusiasm for gothic literature. Finally, the guillotine and the Terror were fodder for more ribald strains within popular culture. These varied interpretations confirm Daniel Arasse's observation that, besides being a cold reality, the guillotine was very much "an *object of the imagination*."⁹

Not only did the descriptions of the guillotine and French revolutionary violence draw upon existing strands of popular culture, they in turn established a new series of reference points and tropes upon which Connecticut preachers and public figures could draw as they sought to hold the attention of their audiences. Just as events in revolutionary France helped to shape a national self-identity, in Connecticut, they spawned a rhetorical onslaught of the late 1790 that was instrumental in shaping the state's image of itself.¹⁰ Central to many of these speeches and writings was the claim that the excesses of the French Revolution resulted from an overreliance on abstract thought by a small elite whose utopian visions led them to defy both Christian morality and common sense, attributes increasingly claimed as Connecticut values. Few in the state took exception to the dominant narrative of events set forth by the

⁹Charles Chauncey to Oliver Wolcott, March 24, 1793, in George Gibbs, *Memoirs of the Administrations of Washington and John Adams*, Edited from the Papers of Oliver Wolcott, *Secretary of the Treasury*, 2 vols. (New York: W. Van Norden, 1846), 1:90; Arasse, *The Guillotine and the Terror* (New York: Viking, 1990), 1.

¹⁰For an analysis of this process on the national level, see Carol Berkin, *The Crisis of the 1790s and the Birth of American Nationalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

religious and political establishment and those that did only served to beget a more tenacious defense of Connecticut's image of itself as the "Land of Steady Habits."

I

The first of these dimensions of eighteenth-century Connecticut culture – sensibility – is evident in the Greens' broadside. The authors and printers of the broadside were clearly sympathetic to the "unfortunate" king. Despite a straightforward, factual account of the execution, the text concludes by reference to the "horrid scene" and to the cheering "*sans culottes* and *Jacobins*." In contrast to the excited crowd, Louis XVI, "the sufferer," approaches his death with "coolness and tranquility" and seems fully ready to receive an "immortal crown" in place of his "mortal one." Depicted as "the soul of magnanimity," Louis demonstrates "a mind enlightened with the finest ideas of human virtue." The January 21 execution, the author concedes, at least released him from "four years of detention" and the "ignominy and cruelty" of the French people. However, neither his good qualities nor the former adulation of the populace "was sufficient to save him from the *Great Sacrifice*."¹¹ If the literature of sensibility is exemplified by the cultivation of a "sense of pathos" and an effort to "buttonhole the reader and demand an emotional, if not physical response," the Greens' broadside clearly fits the genre.¹²

Late eighteenth-century Connecticut was suffused with the culture of sensibility. The rationale for sensibility had been explored by philosophers and men of letters such as John Locke, David Hume, and major figures of the Scottish enlightenment, especially Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Even before the Revolution, literate Yankees were already familiar with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, Lawrence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, and other London novels deeply embedded in and structured by sensibility. Responding to market demand,

¹¹Execution of the French King.

¹²Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986), 2.

Thomas Collier of Litchfield in 1789 brought out an edition of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* and followed it the next year with an edition of the quintessential novel of sensibility, Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*, and the work long considered the first American novel, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, appeared at the same time.¹³

The successful novel of sensibility aimed at eliciting the tears of the reader over the predicament of the helpless woman or the defenseless youth. The situation of Louis XVI on the scaffold met all the criteria, except those of gender and age. Helpless before the inevitability of the falling blade, he seemed no longer a king, but a fellow human being and a victim of forces he could not control. Along with his apparent helplessness, the vast majority of accounts emphasized the deposed king's dignity, "his tranquility of mind." He was, according to an account in the New London *Connecticut Gazette*, "perfectly reconciled to his fate." The initial account in the New Haven *Connecticut Journal* noted that Louis "supported himself with great courage [and] mounted the scaffold with great deliberation." His last requests "breathed the soul of magnanimity." Another account emphasized "the native goodness of his heart. The Hartford *American Mercury*, rejecting portrayals of the king as a tyrant, memorialized his "whole life . . . [as] a continued series of virtues and humane actions" and recalled for Americans his services to national independence. Addressing the Society of Cincinnati in his 1794 Fourth of July oration, Elijah Waterman referred to the king "as a man like myself . . . whose generosity of heart was the originating source of his misfortune. . . . We might drop a generous tear, over the misfortunes of French royalty."¹⁴

¹³Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (Litchfield, CT: Thomas Collier, 1789); Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, 3rd American ed. (Litchfield, CT: Thomas Collier, 1790); William Hill Brown, *The Power of Sympathy*. 2 vols. (Boston, MA: Isaiah Thomas, 1789).

¹⁴Hartford *Connecticut Courant*, April 15, 1793; New London *Connecticut Gazette*, March 28, 1793; New Haven *Connecticut Journal*, March 21, 1793; Norwich *Weekly Register*, April 16, 1793; *Windham Herald*, March 23, 1793; Hartford *American Mercury*, March 25, 1793; Elijah Waterman, *An Oration Delivered before the Society of Cincinnati, Hartford, July 4, 1794* (Hartford, CT: Hudson and Godwin, 1794), 8.

Intertwined with the rise of the culture of sensibility was the rise of the affectionate family in which the nurture of children took on a new importance. Many accounts of the execution reflected this, presenting Louis not as an isolated individual but as a member of the family unit. An account of the events of January 21 in the *Connecticut Courant*, for example, began with the king rising early “to take a farewell of the Queen and the Royal family.” It was an “affectionate farewell.” And the Queen, in the true language of sensibility, was “melancholy indeed.” The Dauphin, age eight, begged one of the guards who was “affected by his beauty and his tears” to let him “go and intreat [sic] the people not to kill Papa.” News reports also played up the fact that the Dauphin was “separated from the maternal embraces” of his mother.¹⁵

But the fate of Marie Antoinette was almost of more concern than that of her husband or her child. Unfortunate women were at the heart of the novel of sensibility; these fictional characters helped to establish a framework for understanding the French queen. As an article from the *Columbian Centinel* and reprinted in the *Windham Herald* noted, “So great were her sufferings” that one of her guards felt pity upon her and appealed for better treatment. If another account is to be believed, she even had time to write sentimental poetry while awaiting her fate.¹⁶ When Marie Antoinette finally did face the guillotine on October 16, accounts credited her with the same stoicism and dignity the late king had shown, but with a sentimental touch. Once on the scaffold, she “turned her eyes with great emotion towards the garden of the Tuilleries [sic], the

¹⁵Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 9-12; G. J. Barker-Banfield, *Abigail and John Adams: The Americanization of Sensibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 291-320; Hartford *Connecticut Courant*, April 15, 1793; May 20, 1793; *Windham Herald*, October 5, 1793.

¹⁶*Windham Herald*, February 8, 1794; Middletown *Middlesex Gazette*, May 11, 1793.

Be hush my soul! For Heav'n prepare
Inmured to anguish, learn to bear:
Thy silent agony is known
Where Mercy's tears begem the throne.

former abode of her greatness.”¹⁷ While French accounts told of a queen “audacious and insolent to the last,” Connecticut accounts made her, along with her husband and son, a sympathetic victim of uncontrolled revolutionary passion.

Interestingly, the guillotine victim who evoked the most sympathetic treatment in the Connecticut press was Charlotte Corday. Unlike the queen, she could more easily be portrayed as a young innocent. Of unexceptional background from the provincial town of Caen, Corday went to Paris in July 1793 with the intent of killing Jean Paul Marat. In her was united “the ingenuous simplicity of a child, with the unyielding fortitude of a hero.” “Not quite 25 years of age, her figure tall and stately; her face and features very comely, and her education, genius, and spirit, kept pace with her external accomplishments.” A widely circulated report suggested that when the executioner held up her severed, but “perfectly beautiful” head a blush came to her cheeks. Onlookers were reportedly more “impressed with . . . her courage and beauty” than “the recollection of her crime.” Even “the recording Angel” of heaven when presented with the word murder “dropped a tear on the word, and blotted it out forever.” So effusive was the sympathy for Corday that a communicant of the often contrarian New London *Bee* protested, “The account of the sufferings of the saviour of the world suffering for the sins of mankind was never described in more glowing colours.”¹⁸

While newspaper accounts were suffused with empathy-filled descriptions of the fates of Louis XVI, the royal family, Corday, and others, the press was not the only source of information. Connecticut readers also had access to Helen Maria Williams’s *Letters Written in France*. A British writer and dissenter, whose initial support of the French Revolution made her unwelcome in England, Williams was famous for her ability to stir her

¹⁷ Hartford *American Mercury*, February 3, 1794; Arasse, *The Guillotine and the Reign of Terror*, 101.

¹⁸ Hartford *American Mercury*, February 3, 1794; New London *Springer’s Weekly Oracle*, November 4, 1797; *Windham Herald*, October 5, 1793; Hartford *Connecticut Courant*, October 7, 1793; New London *Bee*, November 8, 1797.

readers' emotions.¹⁹ Associated with Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft as well as Connecticut's Joel Barlow, Williams went to Paris in 1790 and spent time in the Luxembourg prison during the Reign of Terror.²⁰ The first volume of Williams's *Letters* was published in London in 1790.²¹ Six additional volumes followed, the last appearing in 1796. Philadelphia, New York, and Boston printers turned out American editions that could be purchased in New Haven and in New London. Newspapers throughout Connecticut reprinted excerpts from Williams' accounts.²² Yale President Timothy Dwight called a compilation of her letters published in 1798 "a most valuable and interesting work . . . *It ought to be read by every American.*"²³

Williams's volumes were suffused with the rhetoric of sensibility as she described the victims of the revolution like the novelist she was. In one letter, Williams conveys the moods and feelings of Marie Antoinette: "Her eyes . . . did not conceal the emotion that was labouring her heart." And the demeanor of Charlotte Corday was such that even the "women who are called the furies of the guillotine . . . were awed into silence" and "she inspired sentiments of love rather than sensations of pity." Infants "torn from the bosom that cherished" them and families who found "the sweetest source of consolation in dying together" filled Williams's pages.²⁴ Connecticut newspapers and

¹⁹William Wordsworth's first published poem was "On Seeing Miss Helen Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress." F. M. Ross, "Wordsworth, Helen Maria Williams and France," *Modern Language Review* 43 (1948): 456-64.

²⁰On Williams, see Deborah Kennedy, *Helen Maria Williams and the Age of Revolution* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2002); Kennedy, "Spectacle of the Guillotine: Helen Maria Williams and the Reign of Terror," *Philological Quarterly* 73 (1994): 95-113.

²¹Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Written in France in the Summer of 1790*, 2 vols. (1790; repr. Boston: J. Belknap and A. Young, 1791-1792).

²²New Haven *Connecticut Journal*, July 2, 1794; New London *Connecticut Gazette*, February 2, June 11, 1800. For examples of excerpts of Williams' *Letters*, see Hartford *American Mercury*, November 16, December 12, 1795; Hartford *Connecticut Courant*, November 16, 1795; Newfield *American Telegraph*, January 13, 1796.

²³Timothy Dwight, *The Duty of Americans at the Present Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1798), 21n.

²⁴Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France . . .* (Philadelphia, PA: Matthew Carey et al., 1796), 70, 81, 110-11.

bookstores had obviously found an eager audience for accounts that detailed the sufferings of the victims of the guillotine.

II

One thing that made Williams's tales of revolutionary violence popular was her ability to blend the cult of sensibility with elements of the gothic literature popular at the end of the eighteenth century. The gloomy castles, blood, specters, and villains that filled the novels of Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe appeared in Williams' letters. Robespierre, with his "hideous countenance" and "inhuman soul," was the perfect villain. The squares of the revolution were "clotted with blood and encumbered with the dead" and gave off "the scent of carnage." Williams's lurid style is evident in this description of the dungeons where the Hebertists were held:

Along those subterranean galleries where all the light which entered was 'darkness visible,' terrible phantoms covered with blood seemed to pursue their steps, and menacing looks prepare to drag them to abysses of deeper horror: they fancied they saw the headless trunks of murdered victims encumbering the ground; they heard human groans and shrieks sounding hollow through the vaulted passages; while the knife of the guillotine, like Macbeth's aerial dagger, hung suspended before their affrighted imagination.

Whatever modern historians may think, the *Litchfield Monitor* assured its readers that Miss Williams "cannot be supposed to have exaggerated any account she gives of French transactions."²⁵

In American novels of the era, critic Julia Stern notes, "the sentimental and gothic modes . . . exist in hierarchical relation, like geological strata, the gothic bedrock masked by sentimental topsoil"; the Greens' broadside builds a similar relationship.

²⁵As Ronald Paulson argues, "the popularity of Gothic fiction in the 1790s . . . was due in large part to the widespread anxieties and fears . . . aroused by the turmoil in France finding a kind of sublimation of catharsis in tales of darkness, confusion, blood, and horror." "Gothic Fiction and the French Revolution," *ELH* 49 (1981): 536; Williams, *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France*, 100, 91-92, 177, 141; *Litchfield Monitor*, November 18, 1795.

The suffering Louis XVI shares prominence with “the modern beheading machine.” The skull and crossbones border provides a visual symbol of the deadly business and the text points to the “continual beating of drums” that “heightened the terrors of the awful scene.” After the deed, the executioner holds up the head “by the hair, to show to the populace.” As David Wykes notes, good printmakers “found a way to convert the guillotine, originally proposed as a humane form of execution, into an instrument of psychic torment.”²⁶

Tied up in the very word “machine” were cultural tensions central to the era. Scientific minds of the eighteenth century and enthusiasts of the expanding industrial revolution looked positively upon the machine as an avatar of progress, as did Dr. Guillotine and those who put his invention to work. For others, however, the work was akin to “machination” and an engine (or *ingenium*) implied artifice or treachery, not ingenuity. Famously, Dr. Benjamin Rush advocated that schools should turn out “republican machines” and prisons discipline every aspect of criminals’ lives, but if what historian Colleen Terrell suggests is correct, Rush’s “machines’ slip so easily and elusively between the literal and the metaphorical that it is difficult to see where one ends and the other begins.” The “modern beheading machine” entered the consciousness of Connecticut residents already sensitive to the multiple implications of the word machine.

Designed as a humane alternative to more gruesome forms of capital punishment then in use, the very impersonality of the “modern beheading machine,” its flawless operation, the inevitability of decapitation, its very rationality made it, in the popular imagination, more abhorrent than older methods. It reduced humans and their sensibility to creatures without feeling, mindlessly carrying out the dictates of heartless reason and producing a sense of horror that was compounded in the year and

²⁶Julia A. Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 8-9; David Wykes, “Gilray’s Guillotine,” *Word & Image* 21 (2005): 220.

a half after the execution of Louis XVI as more than sixteen thousand lost their heads to the efficient machine.²⁷

From January 1793 on, the printers, preachers, and political leaders of Connecticut tapped this Gothic dimension of the Terror. Even though public executions in France ceased following the fall of Robespierre in July, 1794, imagery of blood and gore became ever more vivid in the Connecticut press, and these imagined horrors were often more terrifying than the reality. In Lyon, the *Connecticut Courant* reported, “the square where the guillotine stood was reddened with blood, like a slaughter house, while the piercing cries of the surviving relations were drowned in the most vociferous howlings of *Vive la République*.” A subsequent *Courant* article noted, “Three times was the place of the guillotine changed, at every place holes were dug to receive the blood, and yet it ran in gutters.” Reports of the execution of Robespierre, like this one from the *Windham Herald*, were especially graphic. “When his head was struck off, the infuriated rabble . . . rushed upon his body, mutilated it with a thousand gashes, and carried the bleeding members in triumph through the city.”²⁸ Accounts of the guillotine and French revolutionary violence were filled with a mixture of sensibility and horror, and coverage in Connecticut built upon and expanded these familiar modes of literary culture.

III

Other writers saw dark humor in revolutionary violence. As Charles Hazen noted more than a century ago, most individuals considered “the various events of the Revolution . . . serious affairs indeed, but now and then some mocker, upon whom the stress of events sat lightly, [saw] the great movement . . .

²⁷Otto Mayr, *Authority, Liberty, and Automatic Machinery in Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 124; Colleen E. Terrell, “‘Republican Machines’: Franklin, Rush, and the Manufacture of Civic Virtue in the Early Republic,” *Early American Studies* 1 (2003): 101; Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 619-24.

²⁸Hartford *Connecticut Courant*, June 15, June 22, 1795; *Windham Herald*, October 18, 1794.

rather like a roaring melodrama dashed with strong elements of comedy.”²⁹ While a small number of Connecticut residents continued to support the course of the Revolution and a much larger number shed tears, blanched in horror, or both, others responded to events in France with peals of laughter.

It did not take long for the humorous side of the guillotine to make its appearance in Connecticut. A dispatch from London appeared in the *Norwich Packet* as early as May 1793 and noted that French aristocrats were so fascinated with the apparatus they even brought toy versions in with the dessert at their dinner parties. By February 1794, Connecticut newspapers carried reports that the prizes offered by scientific societies in Europe for a perpetual motion machine were being claimed by the guillotine. Another report suggested a proposal to solve the “ancient rancour” that young women had for their elders by sending “to [the] guillotine all women who are barren and old, as being useless . . . in this land of liberty.” In July 1795, the *Connecticut Courant* took note of “a new Game of Cards . . . lately invented in Boston . . . called the Revolution. The Ace is called La Guillotine - the King, Capet - the Queen, Strumpet - the Knave, Democrat . . . The guillotine is higher than the capet or strumpet, and the democrat is the highest card in the pack. . . . [It]. is greatly preferred by those who are acquainted with it to *Cut-throat*.”³⁰ Humor of the ribald or black kind, therefore, descended almost as swiftly as the executioner’s blade.

Connecticut, however, was most famous for its Wits. With friendships and a taste for the poetry of English satirists such as Samuel Butler and Alexander Pope nurtured at Yale, John Trumbull, Joel Barlow, and David Humphreys found themselves in Hartford in the mid-1780s. Along with Dr. Lemuel

²⁹Charles Downer Hazen, *Contemporary American Opinion of the French Revolution* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1897), 222.

³⁰*Norwich Packet*, May 2, 1793; *New London Connecticut Gazette*, February 6, 1794; *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, July 27, 1795; *Hartford Gazette*, February 20, 1794. There does not seem to be any surviving evidence of its popularity in Connecticut, but dance manuals published in Massachusetts provided instructions on the newest cotillions, “The Guillotine” and “The Jacobin Club.” John Griffiths, *A Collection of the Newest Cotillions, and Country Dances* (Northampton, MA: William Butler, n.d.).

Hopkins, they composed a series of twelve pieces entitled the *Anarchiad*. Published in the *New Haven Gazette and Connecticut Magazine* between October 26, 1786, and September 13, 1787, these biting satires aimed their barbs primarily at Daniel Shays's rebellion a few miles north in Massachusetts as well as various characters and developments in their home state.³¹

The violent events in France did not escape the attention of the Wits. A new group of Wits – Richard Alsop, Theodore Dwight (Timothy's brother), and Mason Cogswell – joined Hopkins to produce an extensive body of satires, *The Echo*, which appeared in the Hartford *American Mercury* and the Hartford *Connecticut Courant* beginning August 8, 1791. In 1807, the *Echo* satires were collected in an edition with an introduction that clearly named the occasion for versification: the French Revolution.

Disgusted with the cruelties exhibited by the French revolution, at a very early stage of its progress . . . [t]hey, therefore, proceeded to attack, as proper objects of satire, those tenets, as absurd in politics as pernicious in morals, the visionary scheme of equality, and the baleful doctrine that sanctions the pursuit of a good end by the most flagitious means.

The beheading of Louis XVI was the occasion for the twelfth of the *Echo* satires. The execution of the king, the Wits maintained, was ironically an act of “compassion.” Assuming the stance of a prosecutor arguing for the ax to fall, they claimed that it would save him from witnessing the “scene of woe, of horror, and of strife” that would follow in the days ahead. It

³¹Luther G. Riggs, ed., *The Anarchiad: A New England Poem . . .* (New Haven, CT: Thomas H. Pease, 1861); Leon Howard, *The Connecticut Wits* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1943), 180-200. Howard's work remains the finest study of the Connecticut Wits. See also, William C. Dowling, *Poetry and Ideology in Revolutionary Connecticut* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990). Decapitation was a common subject for satire among the English Augustan writers that served as models for the Wits. Indeed, John Dryden wrote that satire should cut with “the fineness of a stroke . . . separates the head from the body, and leaves it standing in its place.” John Dryden, “A Discourse Concerning the Original and Purpose of Satire,” *Essays of John Dryden* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1900), 2:93. For a discussion of decapitation imagery in seventeenth and eighteenth century English literature, see Regina James, *Losing Their Heads: Beheadings in Literature and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 46-66.

also meant that the king would not suffer all the agonies of “old age, that mournful period of decay.” Summarizing, “In short I think ‘tis proved, as clear as lead that Louis Capet ought to lose his head.” And as the Terror reached its height, the “wicked wits” saw the extensive use of the guillotine as advantageous in spreading news of the French revolution to the underworld: “. . . *Guillotine* quick lets them know, By headless ghosts, in realms below.” And when the Reign of Terror abated after mid-1794, the Wits mourned its passing. In a newspaper carrier’s New Year’s Address at the beginning of 1795, later published as a separate pamphlet, *The Guillotiniad*, Lemuel Hopkins began:

Come Guillotine, Muse divine!
Whose voice o’erawes the tuneful nine.
Come sing again! since Ninety-Five
Has left some *Antis* still alive.³²

Verses, both short and long, were a staple of the American press in the era. And while not all of it was satire (a long poem evoking sympathy for Charlotte Corday appeared in the Hartford *Gazette*³³), the vast majority was light verse. One of the most widely distributed, attributed by some to Joel Barlow who was then in Hamburg, appeared in the fall of 1794 and set to the tune of God Save the King. It appeared in a variety of versions with many verses. The first verse, however, was typical.

God save the Guillotine,
Till all our Jacobins,
Their power shall prove;
Till each disturbing knob
Affords a clipping job;
Let no vile halter rob
The Guillotine.³⁴

³²Richard Alsop, *The Echo, with Other Poems* (New York: The Porcupine Press by Pasquin Petronius, 1807), iv, 91, 21; [Lemuel Hopkins], *Guillotina, or the Annual Song of the Tenth Muse. Addressed to the Readers of the Connecticut Courant* [Hartford, CT: Hudson and Goodwin, 1795].

³³“On Charlotte Corde,” *Hartford Gazette*, February 5, 1795.

³⁴*Hartford American Mercury*, October 20, 1794; *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, November 3, 1794.

Another frequently reprinted song, supposedly written for the June feast of St. John the Baptist to the tune of *The President's March*, linked the decollation of the prophet to those of the French Revolution. Salome was French and Herod was a Jacobin, who first planned the Guillotine.³⁵

Connecticut's reaction to the French Revolution, particularly its more violent trajectory between the beginning of 1793 and the summer of 1795, therefore, was mixed and various, both serious and lighthearted. The often-cited observations about the state of Yale College in the era contained in the autobiographical sketches of Timothy Dwight and Lyman Beecher, therefore, do not seem so fanciful. According to Dwight, "a considerable proportion" of the class of 1796 "assumed the names of the principal English and French infidels." Beecher's reminiscences filled in the details. "Most of the class before me were infidels, and called each other Voltaire, Rousseau, D'Alembert, etc., etc."³⁶ Such adolescent behavior (and almost all Yale students in the era were under twenty) would not be uncommon even today. And, though obviously learned and intelligent, the average Yale student of the 1790s probably did not react to the French Revolution with greater intellectual sophistication than the many readers of the Connecticut newspapers, or auditor of sermons and speeches. While many shed tears for its victims or recoiled in horror, others saw the guillotine and the French Revolution in general as an opportunity for levity.

IV

Connecticut audiences eager for news of developments in France were thus inundated with a variety of sources and approaches. It was Connecticut's elites, however, who in the 1790s

³⁵Hartford *American Mercury*, July 18, 1799; *The Federal Songster* . . . (New London: James Springer, 1800), 74-75.

³⁶Edmund S. Morgan, "Ezra Stiles and Timothy Dwight," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 72 (1957-1960): 101-17. For an excellent analysis of the relation between Dwight's and Beecher's reminiscences, see Thomas N. Baker, "Filial Piety, Infidel Yale, and Memory in the Making of Lyman Beecher's Autobiography," *New England Quarterly* 80 (2007): 134-39.

were largely publishers, ministers of the Gospel, or public officials, possessed a fuller understanding of events in Europe. Given their positions, they became the primary interpreters of events for the state's citizens. Analysis of civic discourse within Connecticut in the late 1790s reveals that these publishers, preachers, and politicians used the pre-existing strands of popular culture to hold the attentions of their congregations and curry support for their viewpoints. These tactics are particularly important in the latter years of the decade when Connecticut, and the nation as a whole, became occupied with the XYZ Affair, the Quasi-War with France, the Alien and Sedition Acts, and increasing political polarization.

In interpreting these events in light of understandings of the French Revolution already embedded in the public mind, major roles were played by New Haven lawyer David Daggett, the great lexicographer Noah Webster, Yale president Timothy Dwight, and an array of other writers, orators, and publishers. Events in France, particularly French revolutionary violence, were staple topics in Fourth of July orations, election sermons, and other forms of public discourse in the second half of the decade. These men captured and held their audiences by touching on shared understandings of French revolutionary excesses. While some of what was expressed was simply for rhetorical effect, these addresses and pamphlets reveal the degree to which particular understandings of the French Revolution had taken root in Connecticut civic culture. As Chauncey Goodrich wrote in the summer of 1799, tales of French revolutionary violence had "got[ten] into every farm house" and "they won't get out, till stories of the tomhawk [sic] and war dances around their prisoners do."³⁷

Typical of the way in which public rhetoric built upon public understandings was David Daggett's 1799 Fourth of July oration "Sun-Beams May Be Extracted from Cucumbers, but the Process is Tedious." The satiric strain is clearly evident in his title and unattributed references throughout to Swift's

³⁷Chauncey Goodrich to Oliver Wolcott, July, 1799, quoted in Rachel Hope Cleves, "On Writing the History of Violence," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24 (2004): 660.

Gulliver's Travels. Daggett attempted to elicit emotive responses from his audience by lurid descriptions of the revolution in France which “has become one great Bedlam.” Such rhetorical devices, however, were clearly designed to secure the attention of Daggett’s audience to his larger argument. The efforts to “extract sun-beams from Cucumbers” were the progeny of “theorists,” “projectors,” and “modern Literati,” who had proclaimed the imminent triumph of reason and the “perfectibility of human nature” and cast aside “ancient habits, customs, and manners.” Speaking as “a plain old fashioned man” (which Daggett was not), he caricatured “cosmopolites” and their ideas. Adoring reason, the French government had acted like “privy counselors of Heaven,” opening new “prisons and bastilles” and “destroy[ing] the strongest ligaments by which individuals and societies are connected.”³⁸ These themes – utopian visionaries, “philosophism” with its emphasis on reason and the perfectibility of man and the alternative wisdom and common sense of “plain old fashioned” men – had been part of critiques of the French Revolution in both England and America since the beginning of the decade, but reverberated throughout the latter 1790s in appeals to the gothic and humanitarian sensibilities of Connecticut listeners and readers.

Utopian visionaries were a particular target. In his Fourth of July oration, Noah Webster declared that “in all ages of the world, a political projector or system-monger . . . has been a great[er] scourge to society than a pestilence.” The sorry state of affairs in Europe was “the inevitable consequences of that failed philosophy which has been preached in the world by Rousseau, Condorcet, Godwin and other visionaries.” In Watertown, Reverend Israel Woodward warned his listeners against “the dark abyss of visionary speculation” and described the government of France “a balloon-like-Machine [sic], lighter than ether, and carried, no one knows where, by the gas of popular breath.” In his extended 1794 poem *Greenfield Hill*, Timothy

³⁸David Daggett, *Sun-Beams May Be Extracted from Cucumbers, but the Process Is Tedious, . . .* (New Haven, CT: Thomas Green and Sons, 1799), 11-13, 15, 17-19, 22-23.

Dwight dismissed utopian thought as a “fairy good,” and called the plans for government “fair and rational on paper, but deformed and useless in practice.”³⁹

The essential problem was an overemphasis on reason. In his 1798, election sermon, Reverend Azel Backus charged that because of human imperfectability “a few fanatics or theoretic philosophers” can without much difficulty bring about an “attack [on] the fortresses of public tranquility, of national happiness and security.” They “worship and adore human reason” and “scourge mankind with their theories.” Their whole system is based upon their belief in “the innocence and perfectibility of human nature, on the sufficiency of man’s nature light, for the purposes of attaining virtue and happiness.” To William Brown, speaking to an Independence Day crowd in Hartford a year later, the horror of the French Revolution emerged out of “the plans of modern philosophism,” the “cruelties the result of cool calculation . . . the firm and systematized plans of a learned people.” “It is part of the new system of political and moral philosophy,” Yale tutor Warren Dutton concluded while poking fun at Condorcet, Talleyrand, and Godwin, “to present ideas in their evanescent state, to confuse and darken what is plain and certain, and to mislead with splendid theories, where it cannot instruct.”

Where babbling Reason, empty, deaf, and blind
Above the name of HIGHEST, sit enshrined;
Who can reveal what changes may ensue?⁴⁰

³⁹Noah Webster, *An Oration Pronounced before the Citizens of New-Haven on the Anniversary of the Independence of the United States . . .* (New Haven, CT: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1798), 13; Israel B. Woodward, *American Liberty and Independence: A Discourse Delivered at Watertown on the Fourth of July, 1798* (Litchfield, CT: T. Collier, 1798), 7, 15; Timothy Dwight, *Greenfield Hill: A Poem in Seven Parts* (New York: Childs and Swain, 1794), 17.

⁴⁰Azel Backus, *Absolam’s Conspiracy: A Sermon, Preached at the General Election, at Hartford in the State of Connecticut, May 10th, 1798* (Hartford, CT: Hudson and Godwin, 1798), 22, 32-33, 45; William Brown, *Oration, Spoken at Hartford, . . . on the Anniversary of American Independence, July 4th, A.D. 1799* (Hartford, CT: Hudson and Godwin, 1799), 8-9; Warren Dutton, *The Present State of Literature: A Poem Delivered in New-Haven at the Public Commencement of Yale-College, September 10, 1800* (Hartford, CT: Hudson and Goodwin, 1800): 7, 9n.

Such unbridled rationality had produced the guillotine itself and the bloody horrors of the Reign of Terror.

The most extensive development of this theme were Timothy Dwight's two discourses delivered before the seniors at Yale in September, 1797, and then published as "The Nature and Danger of the Infidel Philosophy." In a work that is largely a catalog of philosophers and their errors, the general conclusion is that "philosophy" without religion "holds out . . . a general license to every passion and appetite." "Reason dethrones the Kings of the earth, and the Kings of heaven." Dwight, whose passionate defense of the authenticity of Scripture ran as a leitmotiv throughout his life made Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* particularly objectionable, seems even to have adopted terms used by an English theological journal, *British Critic* to describe such authors and their work, *philosophist* and *philosophism*, "to rescue the honourable terms of philosophy and philosopher from the abuse, into which they have fallen." And "the pernicious doctrines, of this modern philosophism," William Brown assured a Hartford audience, "were not meant merely for closet speculations, and impious pastime of the adepts but . . . a practical construction, a literal execution, of their most horrid tenets."⁴¹

True philosophy, as opposed to philosophism, was consistent with experience, common sense, and the truths of Revelation. Webster exhorted his listeners never to "exchange our civil and religious institutions for the wild theories of crazy projectors; or the sober, industrious moral habits of our country, for experiments in atheism and lawless democracy. *Experience* is the safe pilot." On another occasion, he told his readers, that rather than airy speculation, government should be based on "maxims which have been formed on experience." As Timothy Dwight put it, "Almost all real knowledge is derived from Experience, or from Revelation. Theories are generally mere

⁴¹Timothy Dwight, *Nature and Danger of the Infidel Philosophy*, . . . (New-Haven, NY: George Bunce, 1798), 47, 64; Timothy Dwight, *The Duty of Americans at the Present Crisis, Illustrated in a Discourse, Preached on the Fourth of July* (New-Haven, CT: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1798), 11n; Brown, *Oration Spoken at Hartford*, 22.

dreams.” “When the caprice of innovation . . . gets abroad,” declared Azel Backus, “it always ends in blood.”⁴² Ironically, Dwight, Webster and others, clearly intellectuals, were fueling an anti-intellectualism that was part of the fabric of American life.⁴³

The most common appeal was to common sense. Like the imagery of sensibility and the gothic, the appeal to common sense resonated in a public mind already familiar with the phrase. Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* certainly had something to do with this, but so did the impact of Scottish Common Sense philosophy, particularly among the state’s educated elite. The best example of this was its central role in the thought of Timothy Dwight. In 1795, he pointed out that most modern philosophers, particularly those of the French variety, have little regard for the innate “human . . . faculty called common sense.” In a true utopia, “Philosophy would bow to common-sense; and man, from facts, and real life, politic wisdom learn.” Philosophists “employed [terms] . . . so wholly abstract . . . that the reader . . . is left in a mist of doubtful expression, and unsettled sentiments” and “from the highway of common sense is invited into bye paths.”⁴⁴

Although appeals to common sense were not new in Connecticut, they became more routine in the 1790s. In 1791, Noah Webster, already a best-selling author, published *The Prompter; or a Commentary on Common Sayings and Subjects, which are Full of Common Sense, the Best Sense in the World*. Using the persona of a theatrical prompter, Webster attempted “to prompt the numerous actors in the theater of

⁴²Webster, *Oration Pronounced before the Citizens of New-Haven*, 15; Webster, *A Rod for a Fool’s Back* (New Haven: Printed by Read and Morse, 1800), p. 7; Dwight, *True Means of Establishing Public Happiness*, 23; Azel Backus, *Absalom’s Conspiracy*, p. 41.

⁴³Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 146–49.

⁴⁴Dwight, *True Means of Establishing Public Happiness*, 23; Dwight, *Greenfield Hill*, 17; Dwight, *A Discourse on Some Events of the Last Century, Delivered at the Brick Church in New Haven, on January 7, 1801* (New Haven, CT, 1801), 25–26. “Common sense” is a multivalent term. For a broad overview of variety of the uses of common sense in the era, see Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

life." Rejecting satire as a tool and "a pompous elegance of diction," he provides "good solid roast beef" rather than a "dish of highly seasoned turtle" with the goals of extracting "the experience, the wisdom of nations and ages" from "the vulgar sayings and proverbs so much despised by literary epicures." Thus, in their assault on French revolutionary violence later in the 1790s, Connecticut elites had a weapon readily available in an appeal to common sense. In doing so they were also part of a larger trans-Atlantic counter-revolutionary movement in which, according to Sophia Rosenfeld, "common sense . . . served to underwrite challenges to established forms of rule . . . in the name of a special intuition belonging to the people."⁴⁵

While at first glance the use of humor and appeal to common sense might seem inconsistent with the tearful and emotional reaction to the plight of victims of the guillotine and the horror generated by the modern beheading machine, all were central to the emerging republican polity. One challenge of following the American Revolution was to create a unity of purpose and common bonds among the citizenry, more broadly a common sensibility. The appeal to common sense was effective, in large part, because it was, like the cults of sensibility and the gothic, already a part of Connecticut culture. While such appeals to the common man appeared in pre-revolutionary discourse, in the early republic elite leaders *had* to appeal to a wider audience in order to maintain their positions of power and *status*. Dismissing the state's leaders as narrow-minded individuals who were veritable "repositor[ies] of the venerable Connecticut *status quo*" and whose minds were "closed as tight as [their] study windows in January," as Vernon Parrington did, is inaccurate.⁴⁶ Connecticut's elites clearly spoke to and swayed their audience. This is most clearly apparent in the Illuminati scare of 1798-1800.

⁴⁵[Noah Webster], *The Prompter, or a Commentary on Common Sayings* (Hartford, CT: Hudson & Godwin, 1791), iii-v; Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 7.

⁴⁶Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920*, 3 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927-1930), 1:358-59, 361.

The almost simultaneous publication of two works exposing the Illuminati, French priest Augustine Barruel's *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* and Edinburgh professor John Robinson's *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe*, provided Connecticut's leaders an ideal opportunity to appeal to popular sentiment and to win adherents to their religious and political positions. Published in Europe and America, these works alerted readers to the secret conspiracy behind the revolutionary turmoil in Europe. Helen Maria Williams, for example, frequently referred to the Jacobins as a "band of conspirators." The Paris commune emerged, she claimed, because "the conspirators seeing that their crimes were on the point of being brought to light . . . threw off their masks."⁴⁷ Interest in the Illuminati—a secret society of foreign origin, founded by a former Jesuit, intent on destroying all religions and nations and placing innate human reason higher than either tradition or revelation, and emerging at the same time as US-French relations deteriorated into a quasi-war—ran high for Connecticut orators and editors.

Every good gothic novel needs its villains and its conspiracy, and the Illuminati served Connecticut writers well. Two who used the Illuminati issue to advance their position were Theodore and Timothy Dwight. As editor of the *Connecticut Courant*, Theodore spoke in Hartford on Independence Day, 1798, and delivered an obviously partisan address. He elicited the audience's tearful sympathy for America's "real benefactor," Louis XVI, "the amiable, the pious king . . . [who] has fallen a sacrifice to the most wanton, unexampled injustice and tyranny." He was even more effective in his use of gothic imagery to remind his listeners that "victims, whose hearts sunk at the prospect of the apparatus of death, have been forced to kiss the bleeding heads of their fellow victims," the result

⁴⁷Abbe Barruel, *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism, A Translation from the French of the Abbe Barruel*, 4 vols. (Hartford, CT: Hudson & Godwin for Cornelius Davis, 1799); John Robinson, *Proofs of a Conspiracy against All the Religions and Governments of Europe: Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* (New York: George Forman, 1798); Williams, *Letters on the French Revolution*, 36, 38.

of plans “conceived and nourished at the midnight orgies of modern ‘ILLUMINATI.’” Dwight identified Thomas Jefferson and his council of foreigners who wanted to follow the French example as the most likely “proselytes to Illuminatism in the United States.” In contrast to corrupt Europe, he argued that in America there was no special class of illuminati, rather “knowledge is the birthright of every class of citizens, and truths more and divine are taught to all.”⁴⁸

Speaking the same day in New Haven, Timothy took a more biblical approach that was cognizant of current Franco-American relations. He held out the possibility “that our churches may become temples of reason, . . . our wives and daughters the victims of legal prostitution, . . . our sons . . . the disciples of Voltaire, and the dragoons of Marat, or our daughters the concubines of Illuminati.” And, while he was less adept at eliciting tears of sympathy, he outdid his brother in his gothic imagery. The doctrines of the Illuminati have spread “amazing destruction” across Europe without producing any sense of human feeling. “The butchery of the stall, and the slaughter of the sty, are scenes of deeper remorse, and softened with more sensibility.” Unless Americans were vigilant so-called “*representatives of the people*” would “gather your wives, sisters, and daughters, into their brutal seraglios” and America’s streets will flow with “brooks of human blood.”⁴⁹

The Dwights were not the only Connecticut orators to raise public concern about the Illuminati. Speaking in New Haven in July, 1799, Yale tutor Zechariah Lewis warned his listeners of the existence of seventeen “societies of Illuminati . . . ‘workshops of Satan’” in America and “were they to continue thus rapidly to increase, within a few years this happy christian Country would become the Theatre of French anarchy, immorality, and atheism.” Reverend Cyprian Strong in the annual election sermon in Hartford that same year called legislators

⁴⁸Theodore Dwight, *An Oration Spoken at Hartford in the State of Connecticut, on the Anniversary of American Independence, July 4th, 1798* (Hartford, CT: Hudson and Goodwin, 1798), 12, 22, 24, 30n4.

⁴⁹Dwight, *Duty of Americans at the Present Crisis*, 20-21, 23.

attention to the “deep and concerted plan to spread infidelity far and wide . . . to give to the lusts and passion of men full scope” and now it was beginning to develop in America. In his own election sermon of the year before, Azel Backus had warned of “knots of speculating politicians” and “the secret, self-created societies of modern *illuminati*” who were claiming the same “infallibility” as popes and divine-right kings.⁵⁰

The specter of the Illuminati was not just conjured on formal public occasions. To a correspondent of the *Middlesex Gazette*, the order and its “execrable doctrines” were “probably the sources [of] . . . that barbarity, which since the first dawn of the revolution, [has] prevailed in France.” It even made the satirical *Political Greenhouse for the Year 1798*.

At WEISHAUPt”S midnight orgies nurs’d,
The *Illuminated* band accr’sd,
Spread mischief with distructive hand,
Through every corner of the land.⁵¹

In the late 1790s, Connecticut establishment stoked fear of an Illuminati conspiracy to such a degree that it provoked a reaction. The New London *Bee* protested and demanded that Timothy Dwight and others name names. “The cry of Illuminati is constantly sounded from pulpits and in newspapers; prejudices are roused—and you must either explain yourself [or] give up the catalogue of Illuminati.” “Since the days of the Salem Witchcraft, no subject perhaps, has so much affected minds of a certain cast in New England as this pretended conspiracy against religion and government.”⁵² Whether cynical or not, Connecticut elites had flattered the state’s citizenry with

⁵⁰Zechariah Lewis, *Oration on the Apparent, and the Real Political Situation of the United States . . .* (New-Haven, CT: Thomas Green and Son, 1799), 17; Cyprian Strong, *The Kingdom Is the Lord’s . . .* (Hartford, CT: Hudson and Goodwin, 1799), 32–33; Backus, *Absalom’s Conspiracy*, 41, 34.

⁵¹Middletown *Middlesex Gazette*, August 3, 1798; [Richard Alsop et al.], *The Political Green-house for the Year 1798 . . .* (Hartford, CT: Hudson and Godwin, 1799), 16.

⁵²New London *Bee*, May, 22, October 9, 1799. On the Illuminati scare more generally, see Vernon Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1918).

appeals to their common sense and stoked their fears with the specter of illuminatism.

V

The almost universal theme of public utterance, therefore, was that events in France were a tragedy of unimaginable proportions, an excess of violence brought about by the utopian fervor of philosophic radicalism. While not all of Connecticut's public figures wallowed in rhetorical blood, there were few attempts to dispute the basic narrative of events or to challenge the diagnosis presented to the average citizen by the political and religious establishment. One of the first attempts to challenge this narrative came from the pen of John Cosen Ogden, an Episcopal priest who had tangled with Connecticut's religious and secular leaders for some time. In 1799, he published in Philadelphia a pamphlet entitled *A View of the New England Illuminati*, in which he argued that the Connecticut clergy under "Pope Dwight" were just as much a threat to liberty as the European order. And while the Hartford *American Mercury* might refer to Reverend Jedidiah Morse's Illuminati sermon as an appeal to "witches and hobgoblins," the paper itself had reprinted excerpts from it.⁵³

By the late 1790s, developments that began with the Greens' broadside, Connecticut's reaction to the execution of Louis XVI and the reign of terror, and the increasing manipulation, if not exploitation, of public moods and sensibilities by the state's elites, became enmeshed with the increasingly partisan nature of national politics. Challenging the popular understanding of the French Revolution and the standard explanation of its causes and impact was an essential part of Jefferson's campaign for president and, in Connecticut where political parties were inchoate at best, Abraham Bishop took primary responsibility for articulating the Jeffersonian critique.

⁵³John Cosen Ogden, *A View of the New England Illuminati . . .* (Philadelphia: James Carey, 1799); *Hartford American Mercury*, August 16, 1798; August 29, 1799.

A member of the Yale Class of 1778, Bishop was from a prominent New Haven mercantile family and followed a career in the law. He opposed slavery and supported education for women, but these were mainstream political positions. In the late 1790s, paternal influence was sufficient to garner a number of court clerkships, but as the election of 1800 approached, Bishop publicly broke with the Connecticut establishment. Invited to address the Phi Beta Kappa Society on the eve of the Yale commencement in September 1800, Bishop determined to forego the usual platitudes about classical literature or scientific advances and, instead, “selected as his theme . . . the extent and power of political delusion.” When a preliminary copy of his address circulated in the weeks preceding the occasion, the invitation to speak was withdrawn.

According to Bishop, “the great, the wise, rich and mighty men of the world . . . with charming outsides, engaging manners, powerful address and inexhaustible argument” had deluded “the laboring and subordinate people” to maintain their positions of power and authority, and reintroduce monarchy into America. While much of the address attacked the foreign and domestic policies of the Adams administration, Bishop also launched a counter-attack upon the version of events set forth by Connecticut’s elites. Too many sermons, he charged, “intended to show that Satan and Cain were jacobins.” No “arch-Jacobin,” as the Reverend Chauncey Lee had maintained, Satan was actually the first deluder. The deluders “undertook to prove, that the French Revolution originated in philosophy and infidelity” instead of “the excessive oppression of that people.” Noting specifically Zechariah Lewis’ claim of seventeen “workshops of Satan,” he declared the Illuminati scare a phantasm.⁵⁴

Several things about Bishop’s two-hour oration are noteworthy. First, the oration did not get an enthusiastic reception in Connecticut. The Reverend Thomas Robbins called it “very foolish and inflammatory.” While editions appeared in Albany,

⁵⁴Abraham Bishop, *Connecticut Republicanism An Oration on the Extent and Power of Political Delusion . . .* (Philadelphia: Matthew Carey, 1800), 5-6, 22-23, 42n, 44.

Philadelphia, and Bennington, Vermont, no Connecticut printer reprinted it. Second, Bishop was clearly aware of the propaganda tactics of the elite and how they played upon popular sensitivities. The elites, he claimed, had “perverted” Fourth of July celebrations “into days for chastising the enemies of the administration, by the odious characters of illuminatists, disorganizers, and atheists.” Besides the orations, Bishop charged, celebratory toasts reified all the orators’ claims. Once “you set up any thing and pray for it, and preach it, and toast it, the thing becomes of consequence.” Bishop pointed out how they “condensed” the most horrid events of several years into a few paragraphs, making them seem “monstrous indeed.”⁵⁵

But as astute as Bishop was about his opponent’s rhetorical techniques, he struggled to connect to his audience. Besides sprinkling his address with dense economic theories and statistics and criticizing merchants in one of the state’s commercial centers, he showed little sympathy for the common man. While the speeches and writing of many elite thinkers in the late 1790s flattered the common sense and practical experience of the citizen, Bishop’s oration evidenced almost a disdain for the average person. Deluded by the secular and ministerial elites, Bishop claimed the people of Connecticut had assisted “in putting on their own fetters and rivetting [*sic*] their own chains.” They had been taken in by the “best men . . . well-versed in languages and history and political science” who can “argue better . . . than the people.”⁵⁶ Categorizing religion as superstitions and appealing instead to reason was unlikely to win Bishop support among people who were on the cusp of a second great awakening.

VI

While it would be going too far to suggest that public discourse in Connecticut in the 1790s was an outgrowth of a single

⁵⁵Thomas Robbins, *Diary of Thomas Robbins, D.D., 1796-1854* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1886-1887), 1:122; Bishop, *Connecticut Republicanism*, 46-47, 52-55.

⁵⁶Bishop, *Connecticut Republicanism*, 16, 30.

broadside published in New Haven in early 1793, the broadside and countless others descriptions and discussions of revolutionary France both nationally and locally forced widespread reflection on both America's and Connecticut's republican experiment.

From a national perspective, the assault on utopianism and "philosophism" by Connecticut leaders was part of a larger discussion about the nature of America's republican experiment and its place in the world. Historians have long recognized that opinions about the French Revolution and disagreements over policy toward developments in Europe influenced the emergence of the nation's first political parties. Historian Henry May notes that Americans in general, not just in Connecticut, came to reject the so-called Revolutionary Enlightenment that had gained ascendancy briefly in France and embrace a more moderate, practical enlightenment. Patrice Higonnet argues that France's rapid turn to the universalism and the authoritarianism of the Terror and the Directory led to its condemnation by many Americans. The two republics thus moved in opposite directions. To Seth Cotlar, both the rhetorical assault and the adoption of the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798, "created a unique opportunity for conservatives to float antidemocratic ideas that had gained little public hearing in previous years" and pushed radical democratic ideas to the periphery of political discourse. Most applicable to Connecticut are the insights of Andrew Robinson, Matthew Rainbow Hale, and Carol Berkin who argue that the uproar over the French Revolution forced Americans to define more clearly their own national identity. Central to these debates was the question of what kind of polity and society the United States would become.⁵⁷

⁵⁷Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 223; Patrice Higonnet, *Sister Republics: The Origins of French and American Republicanism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), introduction; Seth Cotlar, *Thomas Paine's America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 82-114; Andrew W. Robinson, "Look on This Picture . . . And on That" Nationalism, Localism, and Partisan Image of Otherness in the United States," *American Historical Review* 108 (2001): 1263-80; Matthew Rainbow Hale, "Many Who Wandered in Darkness: The Contest over American National Identity," *Early Am. Studies* 1 (2003): 127-75; Berkin, *The Crisis of the 1790s*.

Connecticut's role in these national debates was insignificant, but the impact on it was even more profound. In Connecticut, the reaction to the violence of the French Revolution, just as in the rest of the nation, forced its residents and its leaders to articulate a clearer vision of the state's society and politics. In reaction to another episode of violence, Shays's Rebellion, the Connecticut Wits' *Anarchiad* starkly contrasted "the return of chaos and substantial night" in Massachusetts with the more placid world of Connecticut. On the eve of the French Revolution, Connecticut native Jedidiah Morse published the first edition of his *American Geography*. Connecticut was, he wrote, "perhaps as perfect and as happy a republic as has ever existed." It "has uninterruptedly proceeded in her old track, both as to government and manners and, by these means, has avoided those convulsions which have rent other states, into violent parties." In 1794, Timothy Dwight's *Greenfield Hill* portrayed the past, present, and future of an idyllic town where common sense and religion laid the basis for economic competence, social harmony, and political consensus, a utopian vision that contrasted with that of the French philosophers. At the same time, David Humphreys urged the state's residents to maintain the "religious zeal [of] our ancestors" that formed "their temp'rate habits" and imbued them with "no lust for change."⁵⁸

In October, 1800, Governor Jonathan Trumbull summarized these thoughts in his address to the legislature: "While convulsion, war, and revolution still prevail in Europe . . . and when internal agitations are appearing within these United States . . . I know of no better course for this State to pursue, than to adhere steadily to her long-tried stability of religious, moral and political virtues, and to attend cautiously to her ancient habits of internal order." The chaos of the French Revolution, therefore, was instrumental in providing Connecticut with an understanding of itself and its place in the nation and world. In

⁵⁸Riggs, ed., *The Anarchiad*; Jedidiah Morse, *The American Geography; or, A view of the present situation of the United States of America . . .* (Elizabethtown, NJ: Shepard Kollock, 1789), 241; David Humphreys, "A Poem on the Industry of the United States of America," in *The Miscellaneous Works of David Humphreys . . .* (New York: T. and J. Swords, 1804), 111.

Connecticut, as Andrew Siegel noted, “Revolutionary France was the paradigmatic example of what can happen when political theory guides political practice.”⁵⁹ “Steady habits” was as much a statement of what Connecticut was not as what Connecticut was. The French Revolution thus provided the essential negative reference to define the essence of the state.

Ironically, it was Abraham Bishop who provided the first recorded usage of the two-word phrase that would ultimately define the state. He was not going to leave this image of Connecticut unchallenged. In March, 1801, speaking at a rally in Wallingford to celebrate the victory nationally of Thomas Jefferson, Bishop outlined a number of obstacles to the “diffusion of truth.” The fourth of these obstacles was steady habits. “This cry of *steady habits*,” he argued, “has a talismanic effect on the minds of our people; but nothing can be more hollow, vain and deceitful . . . With all these facts before us, what is there in the steady habits of New England so very sacred as to arrest the progress of truth? Are the men, who profit by these habits so very learned as to be able to pronounce our state of society the best possible?” Governor Trumbull responded two months later when he praised the state’s citizens for their “attachment . . . to their ‘*steady habits*.’”⁶⁰

What followed was a pamphlet and newspaper war that lasted for four years, a war to determine whether “steady habits” would be a trademark signifying all that was good in Connecticut or a deprecatory term for the failure of the state to move into the nineteenth century.⁶¹ The debate centered on whether Connecticut should continue to adhere to its colonial charter,

⁵⁹Hartford, *Connecticut Courant*, October 13, 1800; Andrew Siegel, “Steady Habits” under Siege: The Defense of Federalism in Jeffersonian Connecticut,” in *Federalists Reconsidered*, ed. Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara Oberg (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 208-209.

⁶⁰Abraham Bishop, *Oration Delivered in Wallingford on the 11th of March 1801 . . .* (New Haven, CT: William W. Morse, 1801), iv, 27; Hartford, *Connecticut Courant*, May 18, 1801.

⁶¹Leonard Chester, *Federalism Triumphant in the Steady Habits of Connecticut Alone . . .* (n.p. 1801); Simon Steadfast [David Daggett] *Facts are Stubborn Things . . .* (Hartford, CT: Hudson and Godwin, 1803) and *Count the Cost . . .* (Hartford, CT: Hudson and Godwin, 1804); David Daggett, *Steady Habits Vindicated . . .* (Hartford, CT: Hudson and Godwin, 1805); Christopher Mainwaring, *Republicanism &*

which had only been only slightly amended at the time of the American Revolution or, like other states, craft a more democratic constitution, one that would end public support of religion. It was not until after the War of 1812 that Connecticut would move to adopt its first constitution. Those who praised the "steady habits" had clearly won the initial battle and with it established an image of Connecticut. As Connecticut native and Vice-President Aaron Burr was quoted as saying about the state, "We may as soon attempt to revolutionize the kingdom of heaven."⁶²

Aristocracy Contrasted, or the Steady Habits of Connecticut . . . (Norwich, CT: Sterry and Porter, 1804).

⁶²Hartford *Connecticut Courant*, April 27, 1801. This phrase has also been attributed to Pierrepont Edwards. Richard J. Purcell, *Connecticut in Transition: 1775-1818* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), 180.

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